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ABSTRACT

Richard Hugo's thinking about teaching creative writing can enhance the composition classroom: he offered both practical pointers about writing and advice about self-discovery for all writers. His pedagogy was directed at the most common elements in all writers--their humanity and their relationships to language, ideas, and feelings. "The Triggering Town" was published in 1979 as a collection of a poet's literary essays. It soon became a popular text in creative writing classes because it was useful for both teachers and students. Hugo believed that all students could write at least one "great" poem or story (relative to each writer's abilities and experiences). One of his best methods was explaining how "triggering" thinking could enable a writer to find out what he or she really needs to say. He stressed the idea that the subject should serve the words and that good language skills created more possibilities for individual thinking and feeling. Hugo maintained that emotional honesty is the real source of a teacher's authority. A composition teacher reports that doing his own writing assignments help him to believe in his own emotional honesty. "Metawriting" (telling the story of how an essay was written) can help students to construct the real foundation of a writing process. It is stated that Hugo's belief that creative writing classes can affirm each student's humanity is true of all writing classes. (RS)

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The Legacy Of Richard Hugo In The Composition Classroom

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The Legacy Of Richard Hugo In The Composition Classroom

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A survey of America's "best" essays shows that today's most widely anthologized essay writers frequently blend such Creative Writing as poetry, narrative and memoir with their expository prose. See almost all of Houghton Mifflin's "Best Essays" for the last five years. Academic discourse in our Composition classes seems to be following a similar pattern. How can Composition teachers utilize Creative Writing assumptions and techniques? How can we use more human approaches to writing that emphasize trial and error and de-emphasize talent? How can we use our *own* writing? How can we use metawriting? And how can we encourage students to better understand their own thinking and emotional writing resources?

This paper will specify ways in which Richard Hugo's thinking about teaching Creative Writing can enhance the Composition classroom. The differing "disciplines" of Creative and Expository Writing have much to exchange with each other, particularly when we can be clear about their common elements. Richard Hugo's Creative Writing pedagogy was directed at the most common of elements in all writers--their humanity and their relationships to language, ideas and feelings. Hugo offered both practical pointers about writing and advice about self-discovery for *all* writers.

The Triggering Town was originally published by Norton in 1979 as collection of a poet's literary essays. It soon became a popular text in Creative Writing classes because it was useful for both students and teachers. Hugo described various methods

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he used to find and develop his poems. He was not didactic and made it clear that "his way" need not be the reader's way of writing. *The Triggering Town* is a very human book that can encourage students to want to think and learn more about their own writing processes while teaching teachers about humility and flexibility.

Although focused on poetry, Hugo's writing legacy, as it is mapped out in *The Triggering Town*, can help to define issues and practices in today's Composition classroom. Whether you are a teacher of Creative Writing or Composition, or both, is not important. Many of Hugo's ideas were about all writing. His predilection was undoubtedly writing poetry, but his most basic beliefs about writing helped shape his (and many of his students') successful non-fiction and fiction.

Before I detail some of Hugo's pedagogy, let me tell you a story about him. I'm remembering one particular class that was taught by Richard Hugo at the University of Montana in 1975. Hugo had an arthritic hip and wasn't able to move around very easily. Anyhow, there was something in his posture that made us all guess we were pretty lucky he was around. It was a beginning Creative Writing class and I thought I was pretty hot because I was Hugo's TA. The class "lesson" had less to do with writing and was more about humility; at least that's what I can recall (with the help of Ed Meek) today. Hugo was talking about a picture and how he used it as a writing landscape. During his explanation, a young freshman dropped her notebook and all of her papers spilled onto the floor. We were sitting in a circle and when the notebook fell, none of us knew what to do. I guess we

all froze in one of those awkward classroom moments. Hugo got up and then kneeled down on one knee to pick up the papers. That one act made me stop feeling "hot" as a TA and realize the need for real humility and grace in the Creative Writing classroom. Hugo, kneeling at the feet of his student was, for me then and now, the essence of what caring about student writing means.

At the foundation of Hugo's humility, was his belief that all students could write at least one great poem or story. "Great," as it's used here, should be understood as relative to each writer's abilities and personal experiences. I'd like to push this point about possible student greatness into the world of Freshman Composition. What if our attitude about teaching Freshman Composition included the prospect that students might well produce that one great essay. If not great in a literary sense, great in a human sense. What if we believed that some students might create the greatest writing of their lives--in *our* classes? This isn't so far fetched. Though it's always our hope that students will progress beyond the "term" limits our classes, perhaps some don't. Some students may never again write an extended essay that included who they were as centrally as it did in our classes. What if it's exactly that human ingredient that allows them to express their written thinking and feeling more cogently with one of our assignments-- than they ever write again for the rest of their lives? Too many of Composition teachers assume that reading a batch of student essays is drudgery. What if we approach that batch as possibly containing a writer's best piece of writing? It was incredibly refreshing to read Peter Elbow's recent essay in *College English* about

liking student writing. We probably don't do it enough. In an after-session conversation with Don McQuade at this year's MLA, we agreed that publishing student texts and approaching them as literature were ways to break down some of the discipline tension between Writing and Literature. Hugo's belief in the possibile writing greatness in everyone, at least once, made him humble. He knew what even the hope for that one great text could do for both student writers *and* their teachers.

A story that synthesizes Hugo's humility and Elbow's liking is "Seymour An Introduction," by J.D. Salinger. It not only demonstrates writing as discovery, but also shows how Seymour's criticism of Buddy's writing includes hope for Buddy's writing greatness. It delightfully illustrates what I take to understand as Elbow's notion of liking student writing. If you teach Writing and constantly read student writing, it can color and enhance your teaching experience. Not only does the story contain some significant quotes about writing form Kafka and Kierkagaard, it is one of the few stories I know of that works *because* it's a story about writing a story. And framed within my response, I'm claiming here that it's a story that can make Writing teachers more enthusiastic and positive about their students' writing. Read "Seymour An Introduction" yourselves and see how this piece of fiction might well be as instructive about teaching Writing as an essay in *College English*.

Good writing is only marinally about genre. It has more to do with intelligence, creativity and language skills. Hugo wanted to help writers learn how to tap their own imaginations. One of his best methods was explaining how "triggering" thinking

could enable a writer to find what he or she really needs to say.

> The initiating subject should trigger the imagination as well as the poem. If it doesn't, it may not be a valid subject but only something you feel you should write a poem about...The point is, the triggering subject should not carry with it moral or social obligations to feel or claim you feel certain ways. (5)

Consider this advice only substitute a student essay for "the poem." All Writing teachers want our writing assignments to trigger our students' imaginations because that is a place where writing can find ideas and feelings. If we don't engage our students' imaginations with the writing challenges or "triggers" that we as teachers compose, then we can depend only on that sense of obligation "to hand *something* in," to motivate our students to write. Hugo made it clear that the "triggering assignment" should not be burdened with a sense of obligation. Instead, the freedom to change was an essential part of Hugo's triggering--and it's essential in Composition classes too. Multiple drafts demonstrate the flexibility of how initial reception of our assignments can change if we really encourage students to drop a sense of "the assignment" and find what it is they really need to say. Hugo professed that the "triggering town" of a poem was not what the poem is about. It was a place for a writer to begin, but implicit in his thinking is the challenge for the writer to find his or her own "town."

In *The Triggering Town*, Richard Hugo developed an approach to writing that assumes

> A poem can be said to have two subjects, the initiating

> or triggering subject which starts the poem or 'causes' the poem to be written, and the real or generated subject, which the poem comes to say or mean, and which is generated or discovered in the poem during the writing. (4)

Hugo believed that the real triggering in writing happens when "physical details correspond to attitudes the poet has toward the world and himself" (5). This approach to writing parallels the way many Composition classes "trigger" writing with discussions, assignments, readings, etc.. Many Composition classes today depend on students thinking about their own experiences to discover the content of their writing. Triggering in a broad sense emphasizes thinking about processes which is the real subject of most Writing classes. Hugo knew that a large part of teaching Writing meant encouraging students to discover and generate their own thinking and feelings about the worlds they were living in. Triggering allowed Hugo's students to understand a method of writing that challenged them to reach beyond what they initially wrote.

An essential part of what made Hugo confident that student writers could progress beyond the triggering town was his belief that thinking about language was always as important as anything a writer was writing about. He stressed the idea that "The subject should serve the words" (6). Many Composition teachers might think that's fine for a poet, but in a class of freshman essay writers, stressing subjects is often more interesting and stimulating than stressing language. Today's Composition theory typically stresses ideation over concerns about sentence rhythm,

word choice, grammar, spelling and punctuation. However, most of us probably don't think writing is ever an either-or process when it comes to ideas and language. I think what Hugo meant was that writers can "follow" their language into ideas--in other words, that consciousness about *what* a writer's words were actually doing helped writers develop clearer conceptions about what their writing could mean.

I've found some possible answers about the constant tension between ideas and language handling by listening to my students. While working on rewriting an assignment, I asked my students to read several chapters from *On Writing Well* which deal with sentence and word level rewriting concerns. I noticed that their metawriting for this essay assignment frequently mentioned a relationship between focusing on Zinsser's language handling advice and being surprised at how this focus increased rewriting energy at all levels. In Hugo's terms, the triggering challenge of word or sentence rewriting, helped writers move beyond that particular trigger to find out more about their own ideas and feelings.

I think Hugo stressed language because he sensed that so many of his students had not experienced enough language centered concentration in their lives, but he was never dogmatic about it. In fact, he believed that "Once you have a certain amount of accumulated technique, you can forget it in the act of writing" (17). Hugo believed strongly in the humanity of student writers and knew enough about psychology to understand that when students could feel confident in their accumulated skills, they would be freer to find ideas. In other words, he knew that good language

skills created more possibilities for individual thinking and feeling.

One of my favorite chapters in *The Triggering Town* is "Stray Thoughts on Roethke and Teaching." (Like Hugo, I know how fortunate I am to have had a great teacher--writing about the experience is only a partial thanks.) Hugo used Roethke to illustrate the point that emotional honesty is the real source of a teacher's authority. "Emotional honesty is a rare thing in the academic world or anywhere else for that matter, and nothing is more prized by good students" (29). I doubt there are many writing teachers who have never had to confront the difference between what we might feel about particular student writers, and what we may say or write on their papers. All of us would probably like to think we are consistently fair and not biased by our emotions, but the truth of this is, we can probably only *try* to construct a sense of emotional honesty. It's a goal that most teachers could work toward every day of their lives.

Personally, the technique that most helps me to believe in my own emotional honesty as a Writing teacher is doing my own assignments. I'd like to suggest that practice as a source of authority and emotional honesty. It shows our students that we are not so far beyond them as writers ourselves. And it teaches us about our own assignments. I also maintain that doing our own assignments makes us much better readers of writers who are trying to answer the same writing problems that we ourselves have experienced. However, this pedagogical support is secondary to the point that we can at least be honest about our own assignments because we've actually done them *with* our students. The

preposition is important here. Our assignments aren't "for" or "at" or "to" our students. Instead of the typical opposition between students and teachers, there's a real basis for collaboration among writers and readers.

In other words, if you teach Writing, write! It strikes me as incredibly hypocritical when I meet a Writing teacher who isn't writing or is afraid to show a stranger his or her writing. I simply don't see any integrity to the idea that teaching writing does not mean doing writing. If we ask our students to write, read and constantly subject their thinking, feelings and writing to the scrutiny of others, why should we ask less of ourselves?

Hugo believed that the writer's quest for self is an essential part of poetry, and he knew that finding that self was not a matter of inspired talent so much as hard work and a willingness to experiment. "Real experimentation is involved in every good poem because the poet searches for ways to unlock his imagination through trial and error" (33). This notion is simply not limited to poetry. As Freshman Composition teachers, it's essential to teach students that our classes are not about seeing who has talent and who doesn't, but that our classes are about developing processes that can enable all thinkers to better express themselves. Or to put it more simply, experimentation and drafting give student writers more opportunities to discover and improve themselves and their texts.

One of *The Triggering Town's* most unusual chapters was "Nuts and Bolts." Hugo described many of his notions about writing, as well as detailing his actual practices. He qualified them as suggestions, saying, "If they work for you, good." Of course in a

chapter that says don't use semi colons and write only with number 2 pencils, we can quickly assume that some of his suggestions are arbitrary and personal. What this means, is that in showing us his personal writing rules as an *illustration* of how a writer guides himself through the act of writing, Hugo is really suggesting that each writer must develop his or her own "nuts and bolts."

How does awareness of writing processes translate into student essays? One technique that does this is easily described in our Composition jargon as "metawriting." I define metawriting for my students as simply telling the story of how their essays were written. I think I know when I'm a success as a teacher in a class of Freshman Composition, and it's not when I read an "A" paper. Instead, when I read metawritings that describe sincere rewriting efforts which have enabled students to learn more about their thinking than they first thought, I know they're constructing the real foundation of a writing process. Doesn't that sound rosy? The fact is, that most metawriting is about the struggle to write. I once wrote a poem for my students based on this struggle called "Hear The Language Warriors." I apologize in advance for possible political incorrectness of using a war metaphor, but for many of our students, writing is an endless battle and metawriting is the story of their victories and defeats.

The Triggering Town chapter entitled "Ci Vediamo" is an exciting example of metawriting that uses war as its context. The chapter began with Hugo declaring that:

> I'll tell you some stories. I won't press the point,

> but I hope these stories demonstrate some of the problems involved in writing. Problems of how memory and the imagination modify and transform experience, problems of stances you might have to drop to order language into a poem. (75)

Hugo knew that the stories of writing were the stories of solving writing and human problems. "Ci Vediamo" describes Hugo's return to the places in Italy where he was stationed and where he may have dropped bombs in World War II. In many ways, this metawriting was similar to the style of his poetry readings. Hugo knew if he could set up a poem with a great story, then audience listening was better focused.

"Ci Vediamo" combined Hugo's WWII memories and descriptions of Italy in 1963 with several poems from his early volumes of poetry. By the time we've read the last stanza of the last poem included in the chapter, we know and feel so much more about the meaning of Hugo's struggle to write these poems. In "Ci Vediamo," "April in Cerignola" was set-up by Hugo's story about driving to Cerignola with a guide named Vincenzo. Hugo wondered about how nice people ever got in a war and recalled his dialogue with Vincenzo, his guide:

> Why did you come back? I don't know. Are you still flying? No. No. That was just war. I'm a poet now. No. Not famous at all. Just one book published. Another taken. Rich? Hardly. (96)

Now,while you read this last stanza from "April in Cerignola," imagine Hugo remembering his lost comrades as he was visiting Italy again.

So why return? you tell me I'm the only one
came back, and you're amazed
I haven't seen Milan. I came in August
and went home in March, with no chance
to experience the miles of tall grain
jittering in wind, the olive trees
alive from recent rain. You're still my town.
The men returned. The women opened doors.
The hungry lived and grew, had children
they can feed. Most of all, the streets are wide,
lead nowhere, and dying in your weather
takes a lifetime of surviving last year's war. (98)

This is the metawriting that followed the poem:

> At the hotel when we got out, Vincenzo did too. He said, "Of all the Americans here during the war, you're the only one who ever returned." He started to sob and he suddenly embraced me and said, *"Come mio fratello."* His crying became more violent and I turned, vaguely embarrassed, and started up the stairs, his choked sobs trailing me from the street. "Oh hell," I thought, "I'll never be Humphrey Bogart or Herbert Marshall," and I sat down on the stairs and had a good cry too.
>
> My wife sat understanding beside me while I blubbered, matching Vincenzo Lattaruolo sob for strangulated sob, though he was hidden from me beyond the closed door, and I never saw him again. I still wasn't sure why I'd come back, but I felt it must be the best reason in the world. (97-8)

For Hugo, it might very well be fair to guess that what he meant by "the best reason in the world" was finding the poem and himself in it. One thing is certain though, his "finding" was a struggle every word and mile of the way.

I'd like to conclude this essay with a point Hugo made in his *Triggering Town* chapter defending Creative Writing classes, and illustrate it with a poem of his. Hugo believed Creative Writing classes were the most humane classes in the university. He knew that most of the content classes spent too little time recognizing who was in them and that Creative Writing classes were probably the one academic place a student really had to think about who he or she was--or wanted to be--as a writer. In *The Triggering Town*, Hugo told the story of a student reading an autobiographical story out loud to a Creative Writing class in 1940. The story was about a fourteen year old boy going to a whorehouse with some older boys. The student was candid about his failed attempts to seem confident and the story ended with him panicking and running away. Hugo claimed that that story would have gotten the student thrown out of most classes in his school. However the teacher in Hugo's class

> raved approval, and we realized we had just heard a special moment in a person's life, offered in honesty and generosity, and we better damn well appreciate it. It may have been the most important lesson one can teach. You are someone and you have a right to your life. Too simple? Already covered in the Constitution? Try to find someone who teaches it. Try to find a student who knows it so well he or she doesn't need it

confirmed. (65)

I maintain that Hugo's point about the ability of Creative Writing classes to affirm each student's humanity it true of all Writing classes. Since we are today, a writing community, or at least a village of writing teachers, let me conclude this essay with Hugo's "Villager." I can't help imagining it's exactly what he would like to say to you.

Villager

What's wrong will always be wrong. I've seen him lean
against the house hours and glare at the sea. His eyes say
no boat will come. His harsh throated seemingly
good natured mother bends her back to the soil
and there at least all grows well. When I speak with him
his eyes move away to the sea and I imagine
the red in his face from drink is also from
some ancient tribal shame. To him I'm wealthy.
When we talk, I know how wealthy I am.

The police have him on file: petty theft.
I'm certain he steals to make up for the nothing he finds
every day in the sea, and to find money for drink.
Some days a woman picks him up, a sister I'm told,
takes him away and hours later delivers him back
passed out. Next morning again he's propped against
the house, the tide out in his eyes. I imagine

his sister, if that's who she is, knows oblivion
is what he must have often to survive.

I have much to tell him. And nothing. I'd start
with the sea. I'd say, there was another sea something
like this long ago, and another me. By the time
I got to the point he'd be looking away and be right.
No two hurts are the same, and most have compensations
too lovely to leave. At night, a photo glows alive
inside him when his mother's asleep and the cops
aren't watching. It lights up in the dark
whenever he looks hard and by dawn has burned out.

I almost forget: he'd do anything for you. Love him
for what you might have become
and love him for what your are, not that far
from him. We are never that far. Love
everyone you can. The list gets longer and shorter.
We're seldom better than weather. We're nearly as good
as a woman we met in passing once at Invergary.
Don't be sorry, for him or for self. Love the last star
broken by storm. And love you. You hold it together.
(Hugo 1984, 415-16)

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